ENGL 347/2 A
Terence Byrnes
Fall 2019
Tues/Thurs 14:45-16:00

Creative Nonfiction

Creative nonfiction (or CNF, as it's come to be called) is broadly defined—when it's defined at all—as a first-person literary form that that uses fictional technique and/or lyrical prose to create a story, report, or essay that adheres to fact and uses narrative. In other words, just about everything that's not easily identified as "short story," "novel," or "poem" may be placed into the large CNF basket.

The first generation of work that helped shape the genre (Tom Wolfe writing about Ken Kesey, and LSD; Truman Capote on murders in a small town; Joan Didion on '60s California lifestyles; Hunter S. Thompson on the Kentucky Derby; or Gay Talese on "free love" communities) was called "New Journalism." Now, some critics concerned with creating a restrictive definition of CNF place it in opposition to journalism, but the two forms continue to share significant strands of DNA. Like many literary genres, creative nonfiction and journalism are not absolute forms handed down from the mount, but collections of tendencies, one leaning toward the dramatic and lyrical, the other toward objectivity and narrative impersonality.

Given the freewheeling and inclusive history of this thing called creative nonfiction, our course will choose a working definition of its own. For our purposes, CNF is narrative, or story, which may include personal essay, and which explores a topic or situation. CNF narratives are about things that have really happened, and the form attempts to represent them in a factually accurate manner. This implies that the writer of the CNF has been party to the events or, reporter-like, has excellent informants. Although the form has journalistic relatives, it isn't necessarily "newsy" or contemporary. It uses dramatization (he/she/they said) and narrative elements, such as "back story," the play of contending forces or conflict, and conclusion. It may have a very distinct—even quixotic—voice (see Tom Wolfe!). It may be filled with personal judgement and the author's take on the world. The author may stand at arm's-length and never appear as an "I," or the author may be in the middle of the action.

Can memoir then be considered CNF? Of course, but there's a catch. A what-I-did-on-my-summer-vacation recitation of events is not a whole narrative without elements like development, character, place, and a sense of meaning extracted from the events. Like all good writing, CNF narrative brings to our attention something that deserves to be there, that finds meaning in the events it recounts, or imposes meaning on those events through the way they're observed.

CNF is not defined by subject, and gladly admits travel, nature, medicine, or any subject with a narrative wrapped around it. On the other side of the coin, it is not academic essay, not rhetoric, not poetry, not a rant, not *belles lettres*, not a list of events, and not speculative fiction or fantasy. On the other hand, it may contain elements of any of those forms.

Example 1: Silver Donald Cameron's "An Island Just in Time"

Example 2: Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*

Example 3: Hunter S. Thompson's "The Kentucky Derby"

Example 4: Fiona Tinwei Lam, "Play"

Example 5: Shelley Leedahl, "Tits"

Example 6: Gabe Marcus's "An Education"

Example 7: Mohawk student from Kahnawake's sniper grandfather, but not Joseph Boyden's *Three-Day Road*

These examples are observed through the sensibility of an invested, judgement-making voice that doesn't strive for neutrality (although it might!).

Workshop Procedure

The workshop has no required text, but it is expected that workshop members will consult the extensive on-line readings list (see Moodle) and search out subjects of interest. Otherwise, workshop members will produce their own work, which will become the class's most important text.

You are responsible for copying, collating, and distributing your writing to the class. Work may also be distributed electronically through the Moodle site, but only if I receive two printed copies of the work before it is scheduled to be posted, and only if the class agrees to this form of distribution. One class period (or more) after your work has been distributed/posted, the story will be discussed. It's essential that you read all work carefully (at least once) before we discuss it.

Requirements

1. The completion of a *minimum* of a minimum of 4500 words of original creative nonfiction. This total includes at least 2 original pieces, one of which may be a substantial rewrite
2. The submission at the end of week 3 of a list of all the creative nonfiction pieces you've read in connection with this class (minimum 5 titles), an additional minimum of 7 titles at the end of week 10, and *brief* comment (a sentence or two) on any pieces that gave you an idea, challenged you, made you think about the form, etc. These brief comments are required for both the week 3 and the week 10 lists.[2]
4. A list of all stories submitted to the workshop for which you have supplied written comments to the authors. "All stories commented on" is the easiest and best list.

[1] Manuscripts must be submitted in a way that's consistent with the way fiction and non-fiction are published, edited, and read in *printed* form, i.e. with paragraph indentations, no extra space between paragraphs, pagination, name of author, date, and word count. If you do use a personal method of laying out your pages, be prepared to justify it as serving the goals you wish to achieve.

[2] See the extensive list of possible readings on Moodle or choose your own. N.B. The work you choose may be book-length or essay length and from a printed or an on-line source. You will choose the works to read according to your interests or curiosity.

Evaluation

Individual stories will not receive grades. They will be discussed in the workshop and the author will receive my (and classmates') written comments. If you'd like additional feedback, don't hesitate to ask for it. Always feel free to return to a point you don't understand or to ask for an evaluation that anticipates your final grade.

The completion of 4500 words of creative nonfiction and the submission of at least two pieces is the *minimum* requirement for receiving a passing grade. Your written work will be the major factor in determining your grade. The computation of your final grade will use these weightings: original work 65% (60% content + 5% manuscript preparation); participation 40% (includes written as well as spoken feedback, *and* punctuality). Demonstrated improvement is also an important factor.

Class attendance is required. Absences will affect your final grade in this manner: if you miss more than 2 classes throughout the term (for non-medical reasons), your grade will be decreased by 1/3 of a letter grade. For each additional absence, the grade will also be decreased by 1/3 of a letter grade. For instance, if the grade based on quality of writing and participation is B+, but you have 5 absences, the final grade will be C+.

Chronic lateness will also be reflected in final grades.

Failure to satisfy any of the criteria in "Requirements" will affect your grade.

Important Notes and Dates

Since your writing is an essential component of the work that serves as our "textbook," it must be submitted during the life of the course on a schedule that will be circulated. *Work submitted to satisfy word requirements at the end of the workshop will not be accepted.* However, if you have satisfied the word-count requirement for the course, you may submit additional work up to one week after the last class.

Note that there is no end-of-term portfolio in this workshop.

Moodle

This course has a Moodle page, which is accessible through your Concordia portal. Daily plans, stories up for discussion, messages, readings lists, and so on, will be posted there.

Necessary Stuff on Moodle

Syllabus
Creative Nonfiction readings
Creative Writing Style Sheet
Forms of Quotation
The Mysterious Comma
Grammar, Language, Voice, Politics, Culture

Unnecessary Stuff on Moodle

Thin-crust pizza recipe

Compare David Foster Wallace's syllabus for a CNF course with ours

"English 183D is a workshop course in *creative nonfiction,* which term denotes a broad category of prose works such as personal essays and memoirs, profiles, nature and travel writing, narrative essays, observational or descriptive essays, general-interest technical writing, argumentative or idea-based essays, general-interest criticism, literary journalism, and so on. The term's constituent words suggest a conceptual axis on which these sorts of prose works lie. As nonfiction, the works are connected to actual states of affairs in the world, are "true" to some reliable extent. If, for example, a certain event is alleged to have occurred, it must really have occurred; if a proposition is asserted, the reader expects some proof of (or argument for) its accuracy. At the same time, the adjective *creative* signifies that some goal(s) other than sheer truthfulness motivates the writer and informs her work. This creative goal, broadly stated, may be to interest readers, or to instruct them, or to entertain them, to move or persuade, to edify, to redeem, to amuse, to get readers to look more closely at or think more deeply about something that's worth their attention. . . or some combination(s) of these. *Creative* also suggests that this kind of nonfiction tends to bear traces of its own artificing; the essay's author usually wants us to see and understand her as the text's maker. This does not, however, mean that an essayist's main goal is simply to "share" or "express herself" or whatever feel-good term you might have got taught in high school. In the grown-up world, creative nonfiction is not *expressive* writing but rather *communicative* writing. And an axiom of communicative writing is that the reader does not automatically care about you (the writer), nor does she find you fascinating as a person, nor does she feel a deep natural interest in the same things that interest you. The reader, in fact, will feel about you, your subject, and your essay only what your written words themselves induce her to feel. An advantage of the workshop format is that it will allow you to hear what twelve reasonably intelligent adults have been induced to think and feel about each essay you write for the course."

Office Hours

I will normally be available after (and often before) class, or by appointment. Office LB 683-6. Voice messages at 514 848-2424 Ext. 2352. E-mail: terence.byrnes@concordia.ca

Your questions and observations